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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000381

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION UNHAPPY DESPITE MODEST MEC IMPROVEMENTS

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[B](#). LILONGWE 326

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The Malawian Electoral Commission (MEC) announced the newly "cleaned-up" voters' roll has been reduced by nearly one million names, and publicly acknowledged the state-owned media houses' clear bias for the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF). Unsatisfied with the progress on the voters' roll, the Mgwirizano Coalition has filed a lawsuit against MEC, UDF, and the Attorney General for failure to comply with the legally mandated 21 days between the voters' roll verification and polling day. Meanwhile, the Catholic churches have reminded their 4 million faithful to evaluate presidential candidates based on their track records and to vote accordingly. END SUMMARY.

5.7 MILLION VOTERS

2. (U) MEC announced on May 6 that the updated voters' roll has 5.7 million voters, following a clean-up by a South African computer firm. The reduction from 6.6 million voters, Chief Elections Officer Roosevelt Gondwe said, is a result of removing double registrants who re-registered rather than filing requests for transfer. The new number is much closer to the National Statistical Office's projected voter age population of 5.5 million.

MEC DECLARES STATE-OWNED MEDIA COVERAGE BIASED

3. (U) MEC Chair Justice James Kalale told SADC Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF) Elections Observers on May 6 that state-owned media houses Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Television Malawi (TVM) have not provided equitable coverage to all political parties. Citing reports from the MEC's Media Monitoring Unit that indicate a clear bias in favor of the ruling party, Kalale said: "Previous elections were fairly covered because the management of MBC and TVM cooperated well with MEC then."

COALITION SUES OVER VERIFICATION PROCESS AND VOTERS' ROLL

4. (U) The Mgwirizano Coalition filed a lawsuit on May 5 against MEC, UDF, and the Attorney General for failure to provide the legally mandated 21 days between verification of the voters' roll and polling day. The lawsuit, which also seeks redress for the UDF's use of public resources to campaign, requests that the courts seize the extra ballots that are no longer necessary because of the voters' roll reductions, as MEC had 7.4 million ballots printed. The court proceedings will begin on May 12. (NOTE: A similar abridgment of the verification period in 1999 resulted in one-month postponement of the elections.)

5. (U) The Coalition's lawsuits follows a separate lawsuit by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) against MEC and the state-owned media houses for biased coverage in favor of the ruling UDF (ref:tel B). The ruling is expected May 14, two days before the official campaign period is scheduled to end.

GUIDING THEIR FLOCKS

6. (U) To provide guidance to Malawi's 4 million Catholics, priests re-read at May 9 masses the November Pastoral Letter entitled "Reconsidering the Future of Our Country: Genuine Change Required." The letter, while not overtly supporting any political party, asks followers to evaluate leaders on their track records and to vote accordingly. In the call for change, some priests reportedly said Malawi does not "need an economic technician or somebody coming from a party which is preaching that this year's elections are not about changing government. We need someone who can change this country." The media has reported the Catholic Church's statements as anti-UDF.

COMMENT

7. (SBU) There is no question that most churches, particularly the dominant Catholics and Presbyterians, are against the ruling UDF and Mutharika. However, they have not demonstrated support for any one individual in opposition. In the absence of clear direction, the opposition vote will

remain divided.
BROWNING